



# Barbara Chase-Riboud

“

*She had never reached out beyond her triple bondage. She had clung stubbornly to the only thing she had ever found of her own in life: love, and love had been more real to her than slavehood. And she had survived both. This was the truth of her life.*

— Sally Hemings

”

## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1939
- \* African-American sculptor, poet, and novelist
- \* Wrote the novel *Echoes of Lions*, about the Amistad

## Biography

Barbara Chase-Riboud was born in 1939 and grew up in Philadelphia. She was raised by her parents, Charles Edward and Vivian May West. As a child, she was discovered to be artistically gifted. Subsequently, she started playing piano, sculpting, and writing poetry even before she was in high school. She went on to get a bachelor of fine arts degree from Temple University's Tyler Art School. After this, she studied in Rome, then received a master of fine arts degree from Yale University in 1960.

After college, she went to Paris, where she started a successful sculpting career. She has received numerous awards for her artwork. Also, while in Paris, she married a photojournalist named Marc Edward Riboud, with whom she had two children. They later divorced, and she married Sergio Tosi in 1981.

This page was researched and submitted by Andrew Munsch and Greg Wilmer on 10/19/98 and edited and updated by Lauren Curtright on 10/1/04.



# Barbara Chase-Riboud

## Biography continued

Because sculpting was the first art that she became successful with, her writing career may seem secondary. Chase-Riboud counters this: she says, “First of all writing isn’t my second choice. Writing is a parallel vocation” (Chase-Riboud Interview 1). She started her literary career with a book of poetry titled *From Memphis and Peking*, which was edited by Toni Morrison and published in 1974. It was inspired by her visits to Egypt and China. She was actually the first American woman to visit China after their revolution. Her next work, the novel *Sally Hemings*, was the book that made her famous. Chase-Riboud is now known as one of the best historical novelists in America. Before writing her first novel, she had become fascinated by the story of a slave named Sally Hemings, who had a romantic relationship with Thomas Jefferson. She had an urge to write on the subject, but she thought of herself as a writer of poetry. “I’m a poet, which means I’m a sprinter not a long distance runner” (Chase-Riboud Interview 1). Later on, she was encouraged by Jacqueline Onassis to write the novel. Published in 1979, the book caused a lot of controversy, since many white people were angered by the defamation of the name of one of their great national heroes. However, the book was critically acclaimed, and won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize in 1979. This prize is given to the author of the best book written by an American woman in a given year.

Her second work of fiction was *Valide: A Novel of the Harem*. It is a saga about a kidnapping and enslavement of an American Creole girl by Algerian pirates in 1802. Chase-Riboud also wrote another book of poetry entitled *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra*. Her third novel, *Echo of Lions*, was inspired by the story of Joseph Cinque, a former African slave who was freed by the Supreme Court after being defended by former president John Quincy Adams. In the late 1990s, Chase-Riboud was involved in the controversy surrounding the origins of the movie *Amistad*, which tells the same story as *Echo of Lions*. For that reason, she sued, but dropped her suit later after she decided that the movie studio had done nothing wrong.

*The President’s Daughter*, a sequel to *Sally Hemings*, was Riboud’s fourth novel. It follows the life of Harriet Hemings, daughter of Thomas Jefferson. Her latest book, *Hottentot Venus: A Novel*, is based on the story of Saartjie (or Sarah) Baartman, a South African woman whom scientists, including Georges Cuvier, exhibited to European audiences in the early nineteenth century.



# Barbara Chase-Riboud

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

- Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (Doubleday, 2004).  
*The President's Daughter* (Crown Publishing Group, 1994).  
*Echo of Lions* (William Morrow & Company, 1989).  
*Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra* (William Morrow & Company, 1987).  
*Valide: A Novel of the Harem* (William Morrow & Company, 1986).  
*Sally Hemings: A Novel* (Viking Press, 1979).  
*From Memphis and Peking: Poems* (Random House, 1974).

### Art exhibitions

- Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Monument Drawings*. Wilmington, NC: St. John's Museum of Art; Baltimore, Md. : Walters Art Museum, 2000. Catalog of an exhibition held at St. John's Museum of Art, Wilmington, N.C. , Jan. 23-Apr. 11, 1998 and four additional venues through Feb. 18, 2001.

### Works about the author

- Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (Indiana University Press, 1993).  
Cohen, Roger. "Judge Says Copyright Covers Writer's Ideas of a Jefferson Affair" (*New York Times*, 1991).  
Dawson, Emma Waters. "Witnesses and Practitioners: Attitudes toward Miscegenation in Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*" in *Recovered Writers/Recovered Texts*, ed. Dolan Hubbard (University of Tennessee Press, 1997).  
McKee, Sarah. "Barbara Chase-Riboud (1939- )" in *Contemporary African American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Greenwood, 1999).  
Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. "Representing the Constitution: Embodiments of America in Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Echo of Lions*" (*Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 1995).  
Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. "'I Write in Tongues': The Supplement of Voice in Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*" (*Contemporary Literature*, 1994).  
Russel, John. "Review of *Sally Hemmings*" (*New York Times*, 1979).



# Barbara Chase-Riboud

## Selected Bibliography continued

### Works about the author continued

- Salviati, Yvette. "La 'Barque secrète' d'un demi-dieu: Thomas Jefferson dans *La Virginienne*" (*Mythes, Croyances et Religions dans le Monde Anglo-Saxon*, 1987).
- Selz, Peter and Anthony F. Janson. *Barbara Chase Riboud: Sculptor* (Harry N. Abrams, 1999).
- Simmons, Charitey. "Thomas Jefferson: Intimate History, Public Debate" (*Chicago Tribune*, 1979).
- Trescott, Jacqueline. "The Hemmings Affair: The Black Novelist and Jefferson's Mistress" (*Washington Post*, 1979).

## Works in languages other than English

### French

- La Virginienne: Roman*, trans. Pierre Alien (A. Michel, 1981).
- La Grande Sultane: Roman*, trans. Pierre Alien, Marie-France Basselier and Elisabeth Lesne (A. Michel, 1987).
- Le Nègre de l'Amistad: Roman*, trans. Elisabeth Lesne and Serge Quadruppani (A. Michel, 1989).
- La Fille du President*, trans. Michelle Herpe-Voslinsky (A. Michel, 1995).

### German

- Barbara Chase Riboud: Zeichnungen* (Kunstmuseum, 1974). Catalog of an exhibition held at the Kunstmuseum Dusseldorf, Sept. 1-Oct. 14, 1974, and at the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Oct. 18-Nov. 24, 1974.
- Chase Riboud: Skulpturen* (Kunstverein, 1976).

### Italian

- La Virginiana*, trans. Anna Solinas (Arnoldo Mondadori, 1989).
- La rivolta della Amistad: romanzo*. trans. Maurizio Donati (Piemme, 1998).

### Spanish

- La Virginiana: novella*, trans. Carlos Coldaroli (Atlantida, 1983).